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Applying Bourdieu's Field Theory to Analyze the Changing Status of the Research Librarian

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Abstract

Research librarians no longer need to perform as many of the traditional chores of the research library. This is due to many factors like digitalization, changing research policies and changes in researchers' behaviour. With these changes also comes a demand for new skills. We seek an answer to how this demand can be met. We argue that changes that have taken place in the research library have also led to a loss of prestige for the research librarians. We use Bourdieu's field theory to analyse the power struggles in the academic field and in the field of the research library and to identify means of reclaiming the previous prestigious position in both fields. We end up creating a 60 ECTS framework for a flexible part-time master's program for research librarians. The first cohort of students has already been enrolled and they evaluate the program in very positive terms.

Key Words: research librarians; Bourdieu field theory

1. Introduction

A quiet revolution has been going on in the world of research libraries over the last 20 years: While acquisition, cataloguing, indexing, and retrieval of materials were in focus 20 years ago, these functions take up less and less time and priority (Andersen & Espersen, 2017; Pinfield, 2001). This is due to many factors of which digitalization is one, changing research policies leading to changes in researchers' behaviour is another. Therefore, research librarians are no longer required to perform the traditional library chores to the same degree as in the pre-digital era, but will instead be met by an expectation or even a demand to reorient themselves and seek new challenges in or outside the library. Unfortunately, the turbulent times are not over yet and to the best of our knowledge no common ground has been established on which tasks 'the new research library' should focus on, apart from their being something that differs from the past. Will the library be 'a hang-out place for students,' a learning centre, a service provider for researchers, an archive, a cultural centre, a room with a server distributing licenses or...? In fact, it could be all of the above, some of them, or something completely different. With new challenges comes a demand for education and for training new skills. This necessity is the topic of this article. We seek the answer the question of how research librarians can educate themselves to meet the challenges of the unknown 'new research library'?

We do not believe that our question can be answered through the gathering of empirical data, which is why this article is mainly theoretical; if nothing else, sufficient data about the future library does not yet exist.

Our overall theoretical approach is that of social constructivism, meaning that there is no right or wrong answer to what the 'new research library' is or should be like. The answer will depend on the functions it serves, and its functions will be defined by its users (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Therefore, the research librarians must, so to speak, create themselves. No uniform standardized educational program can take into consideration all the possible paths that the modern research library may choose and therefore all the skills needed by a modern research librarian – and information specialist.

Despite this relativistic starting point, some useful guidance for thinking may be found in sociological theories dealing with social change and power relations, which is why we have chosen the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu, 1998) as our interpretative and explanatory frame.

This theory may seem somewhat unfamiliar in the field of Library and Information Science, which is why we have chosen to give a brief introduction to it and also explain the central concepts of the theory so that we may utilize them in our analysis.

2. Football and Fields

A football [soccer] field is a physical space, in which football can be played. Football is defined by rules that must be obeyed by the players. If a player fails to obey the rules, he cannot participate in the game. If he tries anyway, he will receive punishment: First a warning and then potentially expulsion. We could call the rules of football *doxa*.

Each player has a certain position in the field. The position is defined by what the player does and who he is. To make this easy to remember one could say that each player has a certain set of habits. We could call the positions of the players in the field their *habitus*.

The various positions in the field have various degrees of prestige to them. They are equally important, because without them all, the game cannot be played. Hence, together the players form a complete set of necessary functions, in other words, a team. The most famous and highly paid football players play midfield positions. We may therefore assume that midfield positions are the most desirable.

So what does a player need in order to obtain a midfield position? It is simple: He needs to be in better physical shape and have more talent than the other players. One could say that his 'power resources' are fitness and talent. As long as he has more of that than the other players, he will be able to maintain his position in the field. We could call the talent and physical condition of the player's *capital*.

Field, doxa, habitus and *capital* are the central concepts of Bourdieu's field theory. Bourdieu uses these concepts to explain 'the game played' in any social field. A social field can be any arena of production, consumption, exchange of goods, services, knowledge and so forth. It is the *doxa* of each field that delimits it from the other fields. Since we engage in many dimensions in life, we are all actors in several fields at a time.

3. Analysing Social Change Processes

Football is a useful metaphor when explaining the central concepts of the field theory, but falls short when we need to understand how to use it. The reason for this is that processes of social change are much more complicated than football. A football field is static and the rules and the roles of the players well defined. The extension and shape of social fields change and so do the rules that apply to them. Therefore, any actor in any social field must constantly struggle to accumulate, exchange, and monopolize different kinds of capital to obtain – or maintain — the desired position in a field. The most desirable positions in the field are where the most capital is. So in short, Bourdieu's field theory is a tool for analysing social change processes and the powers behind them (Navarro, 2006).

According to Bourdieu, most fields are structured around two different types of capital: Cultural capital and economic capital. Cultural capital is often operationalized as level and length of education, while economic capital often is operationalized as income. This may be visualized as in Figure 1.

We must, however, stress that this is an oversimplification. Especially cultural capital can be operationalized in many other ways. Nonetheless, it is quite obvious that the most desirable positions are in the upper left corner, where most of both the economic and cultural capital are located. A tenured university professor would be positioned in the upper left side of the

Fig. 1: Visualization of Bourdieu's field theory.

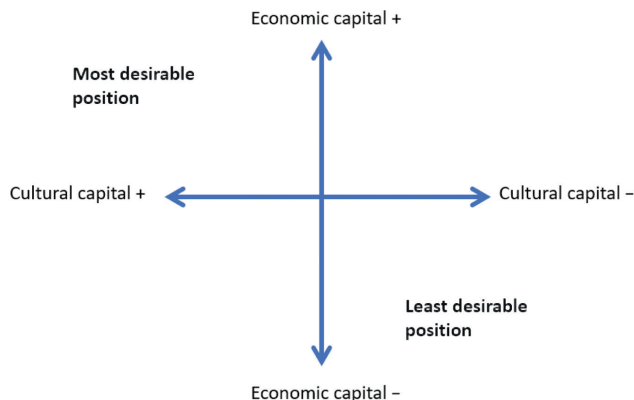


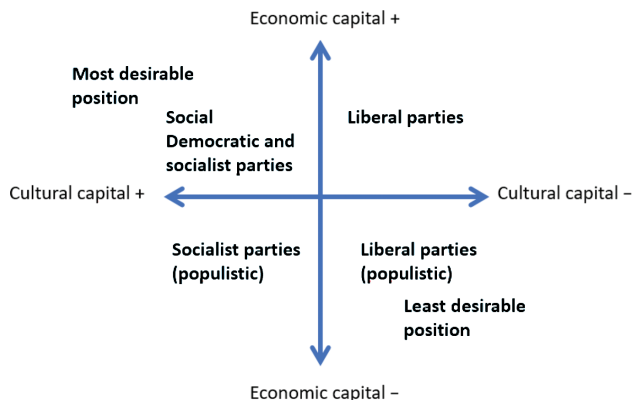
figure (wealthy, long formal education), while a self-made private company CEO would have his position in the upper right side of the field (wealthy, but with modest formal education). In the lower left side of the figure, people like librarians would be located (well-educated, but not well paid), and finally in the right hand side of the figure unskilled labour (no formal education, not well paid).

The positions held by the actors in the field are symbolically manifested by the values and preferences that they share. There would for example be a tendency to political orientation towards the left-wing parties on the left side of Figure 2 and right wing on the right side.

Likewise, there would be a tendency to vote for populist parties in the lower part of Figure 2 while more idealistic parties would find their voters on the upper part. The values and preferences can be mapped according to type, political orientation, media consumption, food habits, etc. in the field (Dahl, 1996). However, it is important to stress that we are oversimplifying both the real world and the theory. Obviously, there will be deviations from these patterns: Not all librarians vote for populist left-wing parties. But since the simplification serves the purpose of explaining the theory, we will continue along this line for a while.

The actors of the field maintain their positions and identify themselves and others through their values and preferences. A university professor is not

Fig. 2: Operationalization of Bourdieu's field theory (after Dahl, 1996).



expected to vote for a populist right-wing party, read right-wing tabloid newspapers, have no interest in culture and prefer junk food. On the contrary, he is expected to vote for an intellectually oriented left-wing party, read the quality newspapers, participate in all kinds of highbrow events and prefer French cuisine. And unless for some reason he wants to make a statement by *not* sharing the preferences and values of his habitat, he will display his position in the field to his fellow citizens through his compliance with doxa. If he continues to show disrespect for or lack of knowledge of the values and the preferences that he is expected to comply with, he may be subjected to social punishment like isolation or even expulsion.

4. The Research Librarian in the Academic Field and in the Research Library Field

A university may be considered a field. The same goes for a research library. Below we will argue that 20 years ago, research librarians held prestigious positions in both fields. But today doxa of both fields have changed significantly and we will argue in the following section that some of these changes have led to marginalization of the research librarians in both fields.

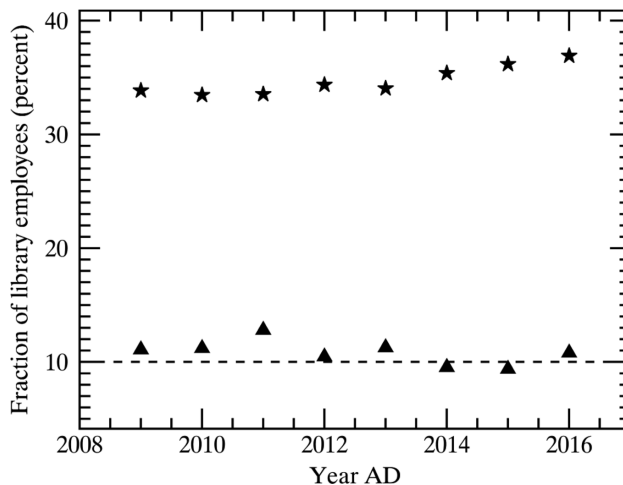
20 years ago, the position as 'research librarian' in Denmark was very similar to that of the tenured associate professor. A research librarian would have almost the same privileges, payment and educational background. He would typically hold a doctoral degree in one of the academic disciplines covered by the library and would furthermore have added a postgraduate course in Library and Information Science (Hjørland, 2011). In many ways, he was an equal partner of the associate professor: One of the most striking similarities between the two was that the research librarian, like the associate professor, needed to be assessed in order to obtain tenure and promotion. In fact, in some American libraries titles like assistant and associate librarian still exist.¹ And a research librarian would also do research within his original discipline and in cooperation with 'ordinary' faculty.

In the library, he would be the superior of the generalist librarians who were both less well-paid and less educated. The generalist librarian in Denmark would typically only hold a BA degree or similar.

But while the fraction of generalists and other academics has apparently increased slightly over the last couple of decades in the research libraries, the fraction of research librarians has decreased (according to the Danish National Statistical Bureau), cf. Figure 3 for the recent period of 2009–2016. Additionally, the number of employees with the title “research librarian” at the Danish Royal Library in the 2010s was only one third of what it was in the previous decade (e.g. Royal Danish Library, 2014). For the past few years, research librarians have made up about a tenth of the total staff in all Danish research libraries (The Danish National Statistical Bureau). In comparison, generalist librarians comprised more than a third of the staff and that fraction seems to be climbing.

We see this development as an indication of the marginalization of the research librarian in both the academic and the library field. In the section to follow we will discuss four reasons why we believe that the research librarians have moved to a less desirable position in both fields.

Fig. 3: The temporal evolution of job titles at Danish research libraries: During the recent period up to 2016 a slight tendency is visible: the fraction of librarians (stars) increase, while the fraction research librarians (triangles) appears to be declining (data from The Danish National Statistical Bureau. Unfortunately, numbers prior to 2009 are not available, neither is yet the previous year's data).



5. Reasons for the Marginalization of the Research Librarian

Firstly, the doxa of the academic field have changed.

20 years ago the most prestigious positions in the academic field were held by what may be called the 'polymath professors'. The hallmark of professors then was their ability to acquire an overview of their entire discipline. However, forced by the political winds of research where competition is enhanced, and where only publication in high ranked international journals brings merit, university professors are forced to narrow down their fields of research. Therefore, university professors concentrate their efforts on increasingly narrow topics and become more and more specialized. But since the job of the research librarian is to have an overall understanding of the discipline and cover all areas of his field equally, and not just narrow areas within it, he cannot allow himself to specialize. Therefore, by nature the research librarian remains linked with the polymath ideal, which has been demoted in the academic field.

Secondly, the research librarian does not meet his clients as often as before.

The development of the Internet, digitalization of documents, and remote access has also contributed to the development. 20 years ago, it was obvious for faculty that information retrieval was a specialist job for which they needed the assistance of the research librarians. Faculty would have to come to the librarians for help.

The development of the Internet's free search engines with their advanced algorithms have led many laymen, including university professors, to think that Information Retrieval is a process of "tossing in a few search terms here and there in more or less randomly selected databases."

Since faculty have remote access to the collections, and since the collections are increasingly digitalized, the reasons for faculty to go to the library and meet the librarians are decreasing.

The developments within collection management have also changed. Previously, a negotiation would take place between faculty and research librarians regarding acquisition: A professor could ask the library to subscribe to a certain journal, and the research librarian would have the power

to say yes or no to the request, and also to negotiate possible terms with faculty. Today most journals are digitalized and come in large packages from the publishers, wherefore such individual negotiations are no longer relevant. Our point is that these developments have contributed to loss of power for research librarians and therefore enhances the demotion of the research librarian in the academic field.

Thirdly, librarianship has been professionalized.

Over the last 20 years, librarianship has been professionalized and academized. We will use an example to illustrate this point: The first Dane to hold a Danish doctoral degree in Information Retrieval is the first author of this article. The degree was awarded in 1998. The degree was not awarded at the “Royal Danish *School of Librarianship*” but by the University of Southern Denmark. We have put ‘school’ in italics since the word illustrates the thinking of 20 years ago. It was a non-academic institution and was therefore not allowed to award the Ph.D. degree. However, also in 1998 the school became allowed by the Ministry of Education to educate at master’s level. In 2001, the first two Danish professors of Library and Information Science were promoted, and the first doctoral thesis was defended at the school in 2004 (Wikipedia, 2018). In 2013 the school was merged into Copenhagen University and changed its name into ‘Det informationsvidenskabelige *Akademi*’ [‘The *Academy* for Information Science’] thereby signalling a high academic standard (Christensen, 2013). It was not just words: The Academy’s curriculum for their five-year master program in Library Science contains elements like history of science, introductions to scientific theories and to scientific methods. Recently the name was changed again into The Department of Information Studies; in Danish Institut for Informationsstudier (INF). This time the title is the same in both languages. Rumour has it that the word ‘Royal’ had to be removed, since nobody could find the original document from the Royal House of Denmark allowing the school to use the honorary title (J.E. Mai, personal communication, 2018). With the new name the institution has become fully integrated into the Copenhagen University. It shares the same organizational structure as all other departments and is governed by the same rules regarding services, research and curriculum. In other words librarianship has become an academic discipline in its own right. So a Master of Library Science earns the same salary as – or possibly more than – a Master of e.g. History in a research library. Therefore, the traditional research librarians can no longer monopolize the cultural capital operationalized as

length of education or the economic capital operationalized as income in the research library field.

Fourthly, the responsibilities and functions of research libraries are changing.

Schonfeld, the director of Ithaka S+R, has argued that “Academic libraries are in transition away from serving principally as collection builders and content providers [...]” (Wolff-Eisenberg & Schonfeld, 2016). Acquisition, cataloguing, indexing and handling of printed material may still be core functions of the research libraries, but their importance is receding: Acquisition can be automatized, publishers supply their books with MARC-records with professional indexing, and users with iPads increasingly prefer digital documents. Therefore, the research libraries need to find and focus on other functions.

As a consequence, many libraries are in the process of shifting their focus towards instruction and learning and towards research support. Research libraries are becoming learning- and drop-in centres for students, research supporters for faculty and providers of bibliometric statistic for university management (Wolff-Eisenberg & Schonfeld, 2016). This in itself does not devalue the cultural capital of the research librarians, but given the circumstances – i.e. the role of the research librarian as a polymath expert of his own discipline and the well-known resistance of change culture in research libraries (Huber, 2011) – many research librarians have not been able to adjust to the changing doxa of the field.

To sum up, while the research librarian could maintain prestigious positions in both the academic field and the field of the research library 20 years ago, today his position is threatened in both fields.

6. Reclaiming a Prestigious Position?

So the question is whether means of reclaiming the ‘previous glory’ in either field can be identified? Of course, our answer to this question is highly speculative, since we are about to make predictions about the future. But to add more weight and validity to our argument we will use the field theory to guide and structure our speculations.

Should the research librarians wish to regain their prestigious position in the *academic field*, this would necessitate that they can demonstrate that they are equal partners of the university faculty in terms of education. One could argue that they already are, if they have the same formal level of education – i.e. a doctoral degree. But a university professor has gone through a series of assessments related to both promotion and to obtaining tenure. We believe that reintroducing assessments for promotion and tenure for research librarians could improve their position in the academic field.

‘When you pay peanuts — you get monkeys’ the saying goes. And research librarians are falling behind university faculty in the wage statistics. Making payment comparable to that of faculty would support the effort of reclaiming a prestigious position in the academic field and make competition for research librarian positions stronger and recruitment easier. But this latter suggestion is problematic: Employers are only willing to pay what they absolutely must. And unless research librarians have competences that are valuable to the employers, it is hard to imagine that these would be willing to pay more.

Therefore, research librarians must be able to do something which the librarians cannot, and this ‘something’ must be in such high demand that employers are willing to pay for it. Which brings us to the discussion of how to regain the prestigious position in the library field.

Perhaps it is helpful to look at the research library as a player in the field of academic research and higher education. Going back to Bourdieu, what are the *doxa*, *habitus* and *capital* when the field is the sector in which the library serves? Or more philosophically: What is the research library’s *raison d’être* in the first place? We believe that it is to serve as a fine-tuned infrastructure for scholarly communication that is delicately balancing a set of services on the one hand, and direct relations to research and education on the other. In this way, the role of the research librarian is quite unique, since he alone can manoeuvre in both ‘worlds’.

Hence, it is obvious that the research librarian should not direct his attention solely towards the domain of Library and Information Science in this respect: He will not be able to compete with a doctoral candidate in library and information science. However, it is obvious that the doctoral library and information science specialist lacks knowledge about other domains and disciplines.

Acknowledging this on both sides and focusing on the potential for cooperation would undoubtedly strengthen both positions. That said, knowledge about central topics within Library and information Science is essential also to the research librarian.

In other words, we believe that research librarians could strengthen their own position in the field by focusing on the changing needs of their institutions and of the individual clients, primarily the students and faculty of their own domain. We believe that the needs of the clients differ in the different domains, so that the combination of a domain-specific degree, combined with Library and Information Science and finished with training related to the changing needs of the different domains, could form a valuable combination in the library field.

Therefore, we do not believe that any traditional educational program can cover the need for education of research librarians. They must, so to speak, invent their own path by choosing from a palette of different competencies: some originating in Library and information Science, others based on qualified guesstimates on the domain specific needs of their clients.

To sum up, we see a need for a flexible and individualized curriculum for research librarians.

For this reason, we have created a framework for such a flexible part-time master program for research librarians in collaboration with the Department for Design and Communication at the University of Southern Denmark. The program includes 60 ECTS and can take up to six years.

For this program, the students must compose their own specialist portfolio. They do so within a framework decided by the study board. The study board has stipulated that certain theoretical and practical subjects should have a certain weight and that the program must be completed with a Master's dissertation, but apart from this, it is in principle completely up to the students and their supervisors which subject the student should focus on. Furthermore, the students may shop at all higher educational programs in Denmark or abroad. Thus, they can choose to focus on i.e. project management, design of exhibitions, event management, management in general, and so forth. The first students were enrolled in the flexible Master's program starting autumn 2017 (Wien & Dorch, 2016). So far, experiences are quite good.

In order to document this, we conducted a series of e-mail based semi-structured research interviews with 7 students from the first cohort of students who each completed 5 ECTS in Data Science and Big Data or 10 ECTS in Bibliometrics. The Interviewees were asked three questions: The first was 'Do you agree that the position of the research librarian is threatened both at the university and at the university library?' And for this question they were encouraged to provide examples. The second was 'What needs to be done to strengthen your position in (a) the academic field (b) the research library?'. The third was 'Do you feel that the Flexible Master courses that you have participated in has contributed to strengthening your position?'. Interviewees were instructed to send their response to a third person who was instructed to anonymize the responses. The answers given by the interviewees are rendered verbatim below, meaning that grammar and spelling has not been corrected.

For this analysis, we will present the respondents' answers to the three questions below.

7. Analysis

The first question relates to whether our assumption regarding the change in the position and the increasing pressure on the research librarians are being experienced by them. Their answers confirm this:

Considering the [...] university library community, it would seem that the position of research librarian is indeed under [...] pressure. [...] To some extent, this is a natural result of the evolvement of new research library disciplines.

Another one writes:

I think that the position as a research librarian is threatened if we don't evolve.

One of the interviewees reflects further on the lack of acknowledgement of the specific skills of present-day research librarians and relates this to the changes in the position of the research librarian. In the quote below, he or she condenses the changing position in the field and what is felt as the marginalization of the present-day research librarians in a striking image of professional agony.

I see my position as a research librarian as someone building bridges between a disciplinary-specific and a library-specific knowledge. But the need for such bridges is not always recognized by either side. [...] I meet students who see no reason to exercise good information behavior, and I meet librarians who pay no attention to patrons' disciplinary identity, "knowing" all the right answers in advance.

Concerning the second question, all interviewees agreed that education was the answer to the question of what could be done to regain a prestigious position. Again, responses confirm our assumption that education is needed, but that respect must be paid to the domain-specific knowledge in the Research Library as well.

I think that it is important that we have the proper education and training in the areas with a high demand from the academic community, so we can provide specialized services to the researchers. Bibliometric analyses have among others become one of those demands. We should always offer relevant and specialized services to researchers and institutes to justify our position as a research library.

Among their other considerations mentioned was the need to distinguish more clearly between the generalists and the specialists in the Research Library and several of them reflect on their own proximity to the 'genuine researchers'. As one puts it,

The strength of the research librarian lies in the handling of complex academic tasks that often require a subject specialist who knows how to bridge the research library services with the academic requirements of the university. In the past, such academic insights have been warmly welcomed by the faculties, by the university staff/scholars as well as the students.

The interviewee goes on to reflect on this 'proximity' and encourages the research librarians to 'cross the bridge' themselves now and then and to participate in the work of both sides:

By continuously contributing to the academic debate, e.g. in scholarly publications, the research librarian not only achieves academic merits but also initiates and sustains scholarly network activities of vital importance. Through these activities the research librarian keeps track of the developments in the academic field. If this could be combined with the adaptation of new disciplines/skills that are deemed relevant for the research librarian in the future, it would be recommendable.

We very much agree with this latter point and have for that reason allowed the research Librarians of The University Library of Southern Denmark to spend on average 30 percent of their working hours on academic research in either their original discipline, in Library and Information Science, or what one might call collection-based research.

Finally, all interviewees agree that they have felt that the courses have strengthened their position as research librarians and that their self-respect has increased. As one puts it:

'Yes – I feel that the Flexible Master course has contributed to strengthen my position as a research librarian. I think that it is a valuable and unique combination that I, as a subject specialist and a research librarian, can combine my knowledge with specific courses that are in a high demand from the researchers and institutes at the university.'

But the ever-changing conditions in the research library also leave them speculating on the potential loss of original professional identity.

'But a balance between adding new tasks and keeping core university interests must be observed. If the core competences of the research librarian were to be completely replaced, one would experience a loss of specialist knowledge which ultimately would lead to a lower academic service level at the university.'

The above quote indicates an awareness, found again and again among the research librarians, of the importance of maintaining their individual disciplinary domains and combining this with Library and Information Science and other skills in order to remain a specific profession.

8. Conclusion and Future Perspectives

Our research question was how research librarians can educate themselves to meet the challenges of the unknown 'new research library'. We have answered this question by using Bourdieu's field theory as our theoretical prism and came up with the answer that there is a need for a flexible and individualized curriculum. We do not believe that a traditional Library and Information Science curriculum can cover their present needs. For this reason, we have created a framework for such a flexible part-time master program

for research librarians in collaboration with the Department for Design and Communication at the University of Southern Denmark.

Students for this program compose their own specialist portfolio and write a Master's dissertation. The first students were enrolled in the program in the autumn of 2017 and the experiences are quite good, as documented by a series of semi-structured research interviews with students in which they were asked three questions on how they perceived the position and potential of the research librarian. The interviewees confirm that research librarians experience a pressure on their position and role in the library, and that specialist education and new skills are among the solutions to relieve that pressure: Fortunately, as students, the interviewees also indicate that the particular master programme is a step in the right direction.

The potential future perspectives of our study on the position of research librarians are strongly tied in with how research libraries themselves develop to meet new needs and requirements from their host or patron institutions and organizations: On the one hand, if the future of libraries is to be an increasingly automatized technological service facility, probably librarians and information specialists will find their positions just as challenged as research librarians. On the other hand, if research libraries become more integrated with the education and/or and research institutions that they serve in order to support increased specialized services, such as data management, research analysis etc., librarians may also find their position changed. In any case, our study points towards its being important to consider which skill sets are necessary on the playing field of the new research library.

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Note

¹ The List 'LibJobs' by IFLA on a regular basis posts positions with titles like 'Assistant/Associate Librarian'. After April 1st 1997 a Danish Research Librarian had to be assessed qualified at the same level as an associate professor in order to obtain a tenured position (Personal Communication Research Librarians Mette Bruus and Ole Ellegaard, SDUB).